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Soviets' spy network damaged, U.S. believes

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WASHINGTON — U.S. expulsions of Soviet diplomats have dealt a crushing blow to Soviet intelligence here by wiping out a substantial part of its senior management, administration officials said yesterday.

Tuesday's announced ouster of 55 diplomats virtually stripped the Soviets' San Francisco consulate of its intelligence apparatus and removed a significant number of senior officers in the Washington embassy, the officials said.

These expulsions, combined with the previous departure of 25 Soviet U.N. mission employees in New York, mark "an end of an era in Soviet operations," said one official, who with two others briefed reporters.

While Soviet intelligence is not "out of business," it will have to promote less experienced officers to act as both managers and as contact agents for Americans recruited as spies, such as convicted spy John Walker, the officials said.

Among those ousted were top representatives of the KGB, the Soviet domestic security apparatus; the GRU, the military intelligence arm; and key specialists in science and technology, politics, economics and penetration of the CIA and FBI, they said.

And the expulsions probably will produce a struggle between Soviet intelligence services and the Foreign Ministry over which side will get to fill vacancies in the reduced diplomatic presence allowed by the United States.

The expulsions were described as part of an administration long-term goal, strongly encouraged by congressional intelligence committee members, of reducing the Soviet Union's diplomatic presence and by so doing cut its intelligence forces. The United States has estimated that one-third of Soviet diplomats in this country are spies.

A law enacted last year required the administration to achieve parity in the number of Soviets stationed here with the number of Americans in the Soviet Union, but it did not specify how that would be achieved.

Such was the size of the Soviets' presence that they were "into gravyland," one official said. Over the past decade, he said, Soviet intelligence has been able to acquire U.S. technology that has given them "a leg up" strategically.

The officials said that division within the government, questions about the appropriate timing and "potential political fallout" slowed the decision to act.

The initial administration target was the Soviets' United Nations mission, which the administration last spring ordered to be cut by 25. In September, after the Soviets had indicated reluctance to act and amid the Daniloff-Zakharov affair, the United States identified the expelled diplomats by name, contending that all were linked with either the KGB

or GRU.

At that time, the administration warned the Soviets that retaliatory expulsion on their part would trigger a reduction in the overall Soviet presence here. After Sunday's expulsion of five American diplomats from Moscow and Leningrad, "we felt it was of great importance to do what we said we would do," another official said.

"When we send the Soviets a clear cautionary message, they should be able to rely on our word," he said.

Among those picked for Tuesday's announced expulsion were those in the ranks of experienced intelligence officers on repeat tours in this country, the kind used by the Soviets to run their intelligence network.

They represent "either the brightest or the best-connected" of Soviet intelligence officers, a third official said.

"The people who would handle ... the Walkers" are those on their "second, third or fourth tour," he said. Those of lesser importance also expelled include communications specialists, report writers and code clerks.

The diplomats declared "persona non grata" will not be able to serve in allied Western countries again, he said.

The Soviets could increase their reliance on "illegals," people dispatched to the United States as part of the emigre flow, often with false documents.

"Illegals can be very dangerous, but they never substitute for a case officer working at an embassy," the third official said. "You have to have a mix and match."

The Soviets may respond by increasing their intelligence presence in other countries, an official said. They might also make greater use of commercial representatives. But since these don't have diplomatic immunity, they are subject to prosecution if caught.